

We live in a world which is being racked by terrorism. Every time there's a major strike, even, before anyone claims responsibility for it, the media are very confident to make the claim "It looks like the work of a highly organised group." Why? Because it's not a random act.

- *It's planned*
- *It's precise*
- *it's targeted*
- *it's effective*
- *it's catastrophic*

These sorts of attacks are not random – they're pl. And today, billions & billions of dollars are spent every year to try and protect ourselves from terrorism.

And, just as nations of the world make every effort to stand strong against the schemes of terrorists, we Christians have to stand strong too.... Only our stand is not against a person or a terrorist organisation – our stand is against something far more sinister. Our stand is against **the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms**. Our stand is against the schemes of the devil. **His** attacks are planned; **His** attacks are precise; they're targeted, effective; and their results can be catastrophic.

Now that might all sound a bit melodramatic, and some of us might shudder at the very thought of these dark spiritual forces moving in on us, targeting **us**, attacking **us**, trying to hurt us..... and all this because we belong to God....

But, while some people shudder, others may simply dismiss it out of hand, as a load of superstitious nonsense.... And because of these two points of view, the mainstream Christian

church at large gives very little teaching on just what it is that disciples of Christ are up against.

The sad fact is, that when it comes to battles in the spiritual realm, people today are more informed by TV shows like “True blood” or “Buffy the vampire slayer”, than what they are by the church or the Bible.

When it comes to the spiritual realm, most of us are quite content to stay in the physical realm, thank you very much. And so, many people attempt to explain away this very passage in terms of the physical. And even bible teachers, for whom I have a great deal of respect in a **lot** of their writings, seem to aim to de-spiritualise this passage, where as that’s the whole point of it – to shift our thinking, **away** from the physical world, so that we can begin to see, the spiritual reality – the spiritual strategy **behind** what we see happening in the physical world.

And so some people say these powers of evil are social systems¹. That they are governments, the attitudes of society, the systems of rule and administration.... and this is all partially true. Because these things **do** belong to this realm of darkness and evil, but that’s missing the entire point of what Paul’s talking about here.

Paul is specifically talking about “what lies behind them”. “What’s controlling them?” *And, just as we can see that a terrorist act has been planned by someone other than the individual who carries it out, So too the kingdom of darkness is ruled and controlled by someone behind the scenes – a personal spiritual power of evil – Satan and his demons.*

And some people – because we’re so “physical” in our mindset – some people really struggle with this concept... But I cannot come to any other conclusion than that the New Testament writers fully understood that these powers of evil are personal, demonic intelligencesⁱⁱ. And I cannot come to any other conclusion than Jesus himself believed this.

And if this is true, and I believe that it is, then we **need** some protection. We need **spiritual** protection, against spiritual beings.

Now, I want to say right up front, “Have no fear.” Jesus Christ is **far** stronger than the devil. The battle has been fought, and even though there’s a few battles to come, the war has already been won. When Jesus Christ conquered the grave, Satan’s fate was sealed. And as Christians, we have absolutely nothing to be fearful of, because this is **God’s** battle, and the spiritual armour that we’re looking at today (and over the next few weeks), is **also** from God. So have **no** fear – do **not** be alarmed – but be aware; be strong; and pray.....

That’s the whole point of this passage: We’re at the end of the letter, and Paul’s summing up, all of what he’s written. What he’s doing, is he’s urging us, to open our spiritual eyes, so that we will know, that we cannot do it without God – so that we will know, that we need to depend entirely on God.

He says:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and

blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

And then he addresses each of the elements of the armour, and then he says what we do about it:

¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, And then he asks them to pray specifically for him, that he may be effective in proclaiming the Gospel.

So be alert – be aware; stand strong **in the Lord**; praying at all times **in the spirit** – and not just for yourself, but for all the saints.

So, if Satan is scheming against God's people, what aspects of life are influenced by his evil?

From the beginning of chapter 4, we've been urged to live lives worthy of the calling that we've received. Now you and I know that that's not easy don't we? It's not easy to live a righteous life. We know that we can try to do our best for God, and yet something just keeps getting in the way. Why is that? Why is it so hard to live lives worthy of our Lord? Well, that's all part of the spiritual battle with evil. All manner of temptations are attributed to them. Heresy is

assigned to their activityⁱⁱⁱ. They hinder the work of God, in so many ways.....

In some cultures, it's easy for people to understand this.

A couple of months ago, I had a phone call from a young ringa, wanting to know "What's in this, when Aborigine stockmen have nightmares and will not venture into a certain paddock???" – what's that all about? Is it real??? Do I need to be worried about it?"

And I was able to say, yeah it is real, but it's not how they understand it. There are spiritual forces at work, but in Christ we have victory over them...

Some cultures are very aware and very in tune with the existence of spiritual powers (spiritual beings)..... While other cultures, such as our own, have little experience of them. In this very passage, we are urged to put up the shield of faith. And I reckon that perhaps for us, we need to accept, on faith, that this battle is one which **is** taking place, even though we cannot see it. Maybe, against your better, rational judgement, you need to acknowledge that there is a spiritual battle that you do not see.

One of the Devil's biggest tricks, is to convince the world that he does not exist.

CS Lewis once said:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them^{iv}.

Alright, we need to be aware of this. We **do** need to know that there is a spiritual battle, but we also need to know, that God has got it all under control... And when we're aware of this, what it does, is it opens our eyes, to who's pulling the strings behind the scenes. And we'll see a few examples of these, as we work our way through the different elements of the spiritual armour, over the next few weeks.

But when you know who's behind the scenes, and what's really going on, that helps us to pray "In the Spirit". If we have an idea about what's going on in the spiritual world, that helps us to pray in the spirit.

So, for example, you may share your faith with somebody, and before you do so, you might just pray, "God, help me to be clear, and to say the words that you want me to say." And you may be clear, and you may say the words that God wants you to say, but you can just see the eyes glaze over in the other person, and the words that would bring them life, just run off, like water off a duck's back...

What's really going on? Why do some people receive the word of God and others don't?

Well, the spiritual reality is this: In the parable of the sower,

Matthew 13:19

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

Right, well if that's the spiritual reality, how can we pray in the spirit, for this person we're about to share our faith with?

Well, we could pray that God would guard their heart from

the evil one. We could pray that they would understand the good news of the Gospel – the Word of the Kingdom. We could pray that God would guard that word, and protect that person, that faith would take root and grow in them...

You see, this is all stuff that we can't do. We can't guard their heart. We can't chase Satan away and prevent him from stealing the word of God out of their heart. We can't make faith take root and grow..., but God can. And that's why prayer – spiritual prayer – is so important.

Another example of praying in the spirit, and this is a personal one for me...

I made the connection about 10 years ago. As you know, I preach my way through books of the bible. So every now and then, I give a message on 'spiritual warfare' (just however often it comes up).

Every now and then, something completely out of left-field, has hit me (or my family), and it's hit us hard. And about 10 years ago, I made the connection that every time these things happened, had been in the week leading up to when I would preach a message on 'spiritual warfare' (which is what we're talking about now).

It took a couple of times before I made the connection.

- One time I had a dream, and the next day, there was a spiritual attack on one of my kids.*
- Several times, discontent or extreme negativity or personal attacks against me, have just suddenly come out of nowhere - people from within a church, would just bring venom and negativity – that almost crippled me in ministry.*

- *There have been physical and emotional attacks*
- *Threats on my life*
- *One time, satanic symbols were painted on the church sign*
- *There once was a time when Robyn's and my relationship just went bad, in one week.*

And one day, I made the connection – every time these things happened, was in the week leading up to when I was going to preach a sermon on spiritual warfare.

Tuesday night just gone, I made the connection again – I should've made it sooner

Saturday, Robyn and I both went to the optometrist to get our eyes tested, for get a new pair of glasses. After they did the test, they looked inside my eyes (with a bright light), and "Owwhh" "That's not good – you need to get to the hospital". "In the next month or so OK?" "No. You need to go right now."

What's the chances? An eye test every one or 2 years, and right on that day I needed to go to the hospital? I had a swollen optic disc – in both eyes – left eye worse than the right. And we thought they were pushing the 'panic button' – we went and had lunch, and Robyn was praying "Lord what do we do? Do I ring one of my doctor friends and ask them? Do we really go and bother the staff on a Saturday afternoon – surely it can wait??? – Lord what do we do?"

And sitting in the food-court of Carindale, who should walk up to us, but Hugo and Ben Brimblecombe. "Ben, we need a doctor". We told him the story. He read the letter. And he said "I think you'd better go". So we did.

And for the best part of three days, we spent at PA hospital, getting scans and tests and seeing doctors and nurses... I don't have a brain tumour (praise God). I don't have a blood clot (praise God). But I do have swollen optic nerves, and I probably have increased cranial pressure – but they haven't found out the reason why. And it's all a bit perplexing to them because I don't have headaches, and my vision (which was tested many, many times in the last few days) is truly excellent.

It was totally out of left-field. I'm well, I'm healthy, and then all of a sudden they're testing me for brain tumours????

Tuesday night it dawned on me – I'm preaching on spiritual warfare this Sunday, and it's happened again – maybe this is another spiritual attack.

And so when I realise what could be behind it, that changes the way I pray. Instead of praying for physical wellness, I began to pray in the spirit. I've got a fair idea about what's happening. I've got a fair idea about what's really behind this?

One thing I've learnt over the last dozen or so years, is Satan hates it when God's children are taught how to deal with him. He will do anything that he can to stop messages like this one, being preached in our churches. He doesn't **want** you to know about God's spiritual armour. He doesn't **want** you to know about the spiritual reality that's going on. He doesn't **want** you to be praying in the spirit, because he knows that when we do this, he gets beaten.

And so every time – I'm pretty sure it's every time – I've preached on spiritual warfare, me or my family have come

under attack. And that's why we value your prayers so very much.

And on Tuesday night when I realised this, I told Robyn, and she said "We'd better pray". And we began to pray in the spirit.

I prayed, "Lord, I pray for a covering of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ over me and my family. Lord, protect us from the attacks of the evil one. Guard us with your holy angels, and with the might of your hand. Lord, if this swelling in my nerves, is the work of Satan and his demons, I pray that you will deal with them – that you would cast them away from me, and that you would make me well. Lord, give me strength to stand against the devil, and his attacks, that I can fulfil the purpose that you've set before me."

When you realise it's a spiritual battle, you can pray in the spirit.

So, what am I to do? If every time I preach on spiritual warfare, Satan attacks me or my family – What am I to do? It'd be so easy, wouldn't it – just to gloss over it, or to skip over it, or to just avoid it. And many churches – many preaches avoid the whole topic of spiritual warfare.

And yet here we are, learning about the spiritual battle – why don't I just give up?

The key word to this passage is "stand"^v. The picture that we're presented with is not a march. Nor is it an assault – it is a defence. As each of us, and indeed the whole church go

about the work of building God’s kingdom, we need defence so that we can stand firm in the Lord, against the schemes of the devil.”

The spiritual armour, is so that we can stand, and never give up. With God’s armour, we are made **strong** in the Lord.

And so we are presented with an image of armour. And this morning’s reading comes right at the end of a letter. And the guts of this letter are entirely relevant to this today’s passage. Right throughout the letter, we find each of the items of the armour being addressed. Truth, righteousness, peace, the gospel, the word of God, salvation and faith are all themes that are taken up^{vi} within the guts of the letter.

And here, right at the end, Paul uses a picture. A common picture to his readers, and probably a familiar picture for him as he observed the Roman soldiers who guarded him as he sat in prison. And so he describes to us, in terms of a Roman Soldier’s armour how we also have the armour of God.

- A belt of truth
- The breastplate of righteousness
- The shoes of readiness given by the gospel of peace
- The shield of faith
- Helmet of salvation
- The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God

And over the next few weeks, God willing, we’re going to see the spiritual aspects of truth; righteousness; the gospel of peace; faith; salvation; and God’s word.

We are not in a battle against flesh and blood. We are in a spiritual battle, and that's why we are so dependant on God. We pray in the spirit, and we stand firm, trusting in God.

Questions?

ⁱ O'Brien Pillar NT commentary (p.468)

ⁱⁱ O'Brien Pillar NT commentary (p.468-469)

ⁱⁱⁱ O'Brien Pillar NT commentary (p.469) (1 Timothy 4:1; 1John 4:1)

^{iv} CS Lewis, Screwtape letters, in Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations & quotes, Morgan RJ.

^v Moule in Foulkes Francis Tyndale NT commentary (p.178)

^{vi} O'Brien Pillar NT commentary (p.459)